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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

US-Qatar Head of State April 2018 Summit

Policy Analysis Unit | April 2018

US-Qatar Head of State April 2018 Summit Enhances Institutional Relations

Series: Situation Assessment

Policy Analysis Unit | April 2018

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

A summit meeting held between the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, and US President Donald Trump on 10 April, 2018 has marked a turning a turning point in relations between the two sides. It also signaled a meaningful, if gradual, transformation in the attitudes of the latter towards the intra-Gulf crisis which broke out in mid-2017. The two heads of state met against a backdrop of regional turmoil, including the current escalation in Syria and the possibility of the US deciding to reopen talks on the Iranian nuclear program.

Background

With the beginning of the 2017 Gulf crisis Qatar, Trump took a position which appeared favorable to the countries leading the blockade on Qatar. In fact, only one day after four Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt) decided to cut diplomatic and other ties with Doha, the US president hinted that he had personally influenced the decision to blockade Qatar during a May 2017 visit to Riyadh to meet with the heads of state of the Gulf Cooperation Council¹. State Department and Pentagon pressure however forced Trump's hand, leading the White House to change its approach to Doha. As Trump continued to be briefed on the background on the intra-Gulf crisis, and his knowledge of the situation grew more nuanced, his position on the spat between Qatar and her neighbors shifted perceptibly. As observers pointed out, the last few months leading up to the meeting between the Qatari and US heads of state saw a change, with Trump eventually recognizing Qatar's role as an ally in the fight against terrorism². One source close to the US Administration has also pointed out that the US president is now increasingly sympathetic to Qatar's stance in the blockade.

For Doha, this was also the culmination of a strategy in which it attempted to untangle its relations with Washington from its relations with the countries leading the blockade, which have their own robust alliances with the US. Qatari success came through the country's ability to work to resolve outstanding conflicts with the US leadership, clearing the path for better relations with the White House.

¹ See the Tweet from Donald Trump here: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/872062159789985792>

² See, "Trump Now Sees Qatar as an Ally Against Terrorism," by Peter Baker, *The New York Times*, April 10, 2018, available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/10/world/middleeast/trump-qatar-terrorism.html>

The first signs of a shift in Trump's attitude to the Gulf crisis came after a meeting between the US president and the Emir of Qatar on the sidelines of the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly, in September of 2017. In statements released to the press by the White House, Trump spoke of the friendship which tied him to the Emir of Qatar "even before I entered the world of politics". Pointing out in particular the purchases of weapons and other US-made equipment by Qatar, Trump appeared to put the best foot forward for the multi-faceted relations between Washington and Doha³.

That meeting between Trump and Sheikh Tamim paved the way for a wider Qatari-US official dialogue in January of the following year. Overseen by the foreign and defense ministers of both countries, Washington and Doha decided to cement this relationship with an agreed upon annual meeting⁴. At the time, analysts tended to agree that by succeeding in convening such a bilateral meeting between the two countries, that Qatar had successfully prevented the countries leading the blockade from isolating Doha among US policymakers. It also worked to warn the four countries which had led the isolation of Qatar against taking up any kind of military adventurism against their neighbor.

Attempts by the blockading states to try to replace the Emir of Qatar with a pretender from within the ruling Al Thani family seem to have backfired, raising the ire of the US leadership. Trump made a concerted effort to declare that Sheikh Tamim was "very popular" among Qataris, undermining attempts by the blockading countries to discredit the Emir of Qatar⁵.

Trump Changes his Tune on Qatar

The factors which eventually turned Trump's position rested on:

- Growing fears in the US that a failure to address the intra-Gulf crisis would result in wider regional instability, particularly given the prospect for greater involvement by

³ See, "Remarks by President Trump and Emir Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani Before Bilateral Meeting," White House, published online on September 19, 2017: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-emir-tamim-bin-hamad-al-thani-bilateral-meeting/>

⁴ See, "Joint Statement of the Inaugural United States-Qatar Strategic Dialogue," US Department of State, January 30, 2018, available online: <https://qa.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-inaugural-united-states-qatar-strategic-dialogue/>

⁵ See, "Remarks by President and Amir [sic] Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani of the State of Qatar Before Bilateral Meeting," White House, April 10, 2018, available online: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-amir-tamim-bin-hamad-al-thani-state-qatar-bilateral-meeting/>

Russia and Iran in Gulf affairs as a result of the tensions between the GCC states. The sense of increasing American inability to resolve the crisis also further accelerated and promoted the role of Turkey as an independent actor in the Syrian crisis.

- Simultaneously, the Pentagon's reliance on having a military base at Khor Al Udeid in Qatar grew ever more pressing with rising tensions across the Middle East region. The base, which houses 11,000 US soldiers as well as a command center and a joint operations room is vital to US air force operations in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and 18 other countries. The Al Udeid base is also an advance base for United States Central Command, as well as an Air and Space Operations Center.
- The threat of Iran being able to make greater inroads into Qatar and the region as a result of the crisis in intra-Gulf relations also heightened American desire for a resolution to the conflict and to patch up its own relations with Doha. This was particularly true given Trump's stated desire to renegotiate the Iran nuclear deal; his advisers were quick to point out that the American president's seeming bias in favor of the blockading countries was not going to help the cause of containing Iran, or of forming a broad coalition including both Israel and a number of Gulf states in opposition to Tehran⁶.
- Qatari lobbying efforts in Washington have also been successful in countering the smear campaign led against Doha by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in the American press.
- The eclipse of Trump's son-in-law and advisor Jared Kushner, whose high-level security clearance was recently suspended, has helped to limit anti-Qatari momentum in Washington. Previously, Kushner had been a reliable ally of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In a related development, revelations in the US press that the UAE had, together with Russia, been inappropriately involved with Trump's election campaign has damaged the Emiratis' image in the US. Pivotal in this shift in public perceptions of the UAE were leaks of emails between then-UAE Ambassador to Washington Yousuf Al Otaiba and US political figures in which the Emirati diplomat was seen to goad the US against Qatar. The changing fortunes of the UAE in American politics were highlighted by two separate court cases. In the first, a US federal judge agreed that enough evidence existed to bring forward a court case in which the UAE is accused of hacking the email account of a prominent foreign businessman in order to blackmail him. In a second case heard in a Californian court, a judge dismissed a court case brought by Elliott Broidy, a major fundraiser for the Republican Party as well as a close associate of the UAE, in which he claimed that Qatar had been behind the hacking of his emails. The emails in question painted a picture of the businessman and Republican grandee as being behind Trump's alignment with the UAE as well as the dismissal of former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Ultimately, Qatari involvement in the email leak could not be proved. A result of these developments is Trump's conclusion that it was not Qatar, but the Emirati Crown

⁶ Jennifer Jacobs, "Trump Warned Saudis Off Military Move on Qatar," *Bloomberg*, September 19, 2017, available online: <https://bloom.bg/2ynlRrF>

Prince and de-facto ruler Mohammed Bin Zayed, who was holding back resolution of the intra-Gulf crisis.

Conclusion

Trump's change of position towards the intra-Gulf crisis does not mean that the conflict will soon be resolved, but it signals that avenues for its resolution have been exhausted. A meeting between all of the Gulf heads of state scheduled for May, 2018 in Washington, DC had to be postponed until September following the insistence of Emirati and Saudi leaderships on continuing the blockade of Qatar. This Saudi and the Emirati intransigence held even in spite of a phone call between Trump and the King of Saudi Arabia on April 2 of this year, in which the US president urged the Saudis to end the dispute with Qatar in order to build a stronger Arab front to challenge Iran. Trump asserted that there was "no logic" behind the hostility to Qatar by its neighbors. The urgency of resolving an imminent crisis with Iran meant that the White House was eager to end the intra-Gulf dispute within a matter of weeks⁷. The same demand was repeated to the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi in a separate phone call⁸.

Despite vigorous efforts by the US president to end the intra-Gulf crisis, there is no clear indication that it will come to an end without a shift in the attitudes of the blockading countries first. Adding to this uncertainty is the disarray within the White House, where it seems that there is little to no coordination between the varying Departments of the US Administration dealing with some of the most pressing and vital issues to US national interests. One symptom of this is that the Trump Administration has not even appointed ambassadors to either Doha, Abu Dhabi or Riyadh.

Ultimately, predicting the future trajectory of the intra-Gulf crisis remains difficult. One of the certainties is that Qatar has weathered the storm of the early days of the intra-Gulf crisis and, since September 2017, has been in a much enhanced position compared to the immediate aftermath of the May, 2017 hacking of the Qatar News Agency website. Finally, that Doha-Washington relations have survived the departure of Rex Tillerson from the State Department has disproven the previously held belief in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, that Qatar's relations with

⁷ Warren Strobel and John Walcott, "In call with Saudi king, Trump demanded quick end to Gulf rift—US officials," *Reuters*, 11 April, 2018, available online: <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1HI32O>

⁸ "Trump, UAE leader push for unity in Gulf as dispute drags on," *Reuters*, 7 April, 2018, available online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-gulf/trump-uae-leader-push-for-unity-in-gulf-as-dispute-drags-on-idUSKCN1HE01N>

the United States were built on personal, not institutional, relations and that they would not withstand the test of time.